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## Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### MULTI-FACETED NATIVE CULTURES ON VIEW AT THE ALASKA STATE MUSEUM

The Alaska State Museum, located in the colorful capital city of Juneau, has a long-standing reputation for quality displays of Alaska Native cultural materials. This summer the museum is host to two special exhibitions featuring both traditional and non-traditional facets of those cultures.

“Yuungnaqpiallerput (The Way We Genuinely Live): Masterworks of Yup’ik Science and Survival” explores the ways traditional Eskimo culture developed tools and technology for living in the harsh sub-arctic environment of western Alaska. The second exhibit, “Weapons of Mass Defense,” presents recent contemporary artworks by Da-ka-xeen Mehner, a young artist with Southeast Alaskan Tlingit ancestry.

In “The Way We Genuinely Live,” remarkable 19th and early 20th century tools, containers, weapons, watercraft and clothing represent the scientific principles and processes – snowshoes and dome-style houses being but two examples – that have allowed the Yup’ik people to adapt to living in the sub-arctic tundra of the Bering Sea coast. Featuring masterworks ranging from a needle made from a crane wing bone to elegant bentwood hunting hats, the exhibition is a tribute to the ingenuity of this ancient culture and illustrates the intimate relationship between humans and their environment.

The exhibition is based on knowledge shared by Yup’ik elders and takes visitors through the seasonal cycle of traditional activities. At interactive science stations, visitors can engage in hands-on activities that show how and why things work. Video and audio programs document traditional activities as well as the construction of traditional Yup’ik tools. At the

exhibition's core is the recognition that the Yup'ik way of life – both past and present – is grounded in deep spiritual values and scientific principles.

The more than 200 exhibition objects come from the collections of 13 museums in the United States and Germany. “The Way We Genuinely Live” is curated by cultural anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan, and is a joint project of the Anchorage Museum and the Calista Elders Council, a leading Native cultural organization in southwest Alaska. It was developed with the guidance of Yup'ik elders, scientists, and educators and with major support from the National Science Foundation. An extensive catalog for the exhibit has been published by the University of Washington Press. For more information, go to the exhibit website at: <http://yupikscience.org/>

### “Weapons of Mass Defense”

Artist Da-ka-xeen Mehner represents a new generation of Alaska Native artists who see themselves as both representatives of their traditional cultures and as members of the global art community. Often they may push the boundaries of traditional forms or utilize non-traditional technologies such as photography or video. Sometimes controversial, their work may challenge conventional expectations, but the art is often based in a strong sense of respect for its origins.

Mehner is part Alaska Native (Tlingit-Nishga) and part Caucasian (German-Irish). He pronounces his name, DAH-ka-kheen Mayner (the "x" sounds like a guttural "h"). He has followed an interest in art most of his life and in the early 1990s studied at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, a familiar venue for many young Native Alaskans interested in art.

Writing about his work for his exhibit “Weapons of Mass Defense,” Mehner said, “I draw inspiration from the material culture of my Tlingit ancestors. The knife form comes from the fighting knives the Tlingit used to use. I see the knife as a symbol of my struggles. At times my personal battles become so great my only defense is to make a bigger weapon. Some of the knife forms are eight feet tall. This personal escalation forces me to be a better person, to rise up and face the challenges, and defend that which is most important to me.”

According to Mehner, the exhibit will “give the viewer space to define the battle for themselves. What is it that we fight for or against? What struggles do we confront? How many problems do we overcome in a day? A life? A history of a people?”

### *Permanent collection*

In addition to these temporary exhibitions, the Alaska State Museum offers a range of permanent displays highlighting Alaska's history, indigenous cultures and natural history. These exhibits take up more than half of the museum's exhibition space and range from a life-sized eagle nesting tree to a scaled-down version of the stern of Capt. George Vancouver's ship *Discovery*, dry-docked in the museum's children's room.

The museum, located in downtown Juneau on Whittier Street, continues to build collections that reflect the diversity and richness of Alaska both yesterday and today. It is home to more than 30,000 artifacts, specimens and works of art. Among its most popular exhibits are those that feature Alaska's distinct Native populations including Tlingit, Athabascan, Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Alutiiq, Unangan, Haida and Tsimshian. Also shown are items from the European and American expansion into Alaska, including Gold Rush memorabilia, as well as icons and other objects from Russian America days.

Docents offer tours of the museum during the summer and by special arrangement during the rest of the year. The museum's store, operated by The Friends of the Alaska State Museum, features baskets, jewelry and carvings made by Alaskans, as well as books and note cards. Summer hours at the Alaska State Museum are 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily. General admission is \$5 during the summer season, with annual passes that allow unlimited visits available for \$15.

### SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

The State of Alaska also oversees another museum, the Sheldon Jackson Museum, in Sitka, the former capital of Russian America. Founded in 1888, the Sheldon Jackson Museum is the oldest continuously operated museum in Alaska. It is housed in Alaska's first concrete building, constructed in 1895 and now included on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1984 the State of Alaska purchased the Sheldon Jackson Museum, formerly part of Sheldon Jackson College, to prevent its collection from being sold off outside the state. The museum is located on the former campus of Sheldon Jackson College. The college closed in 2007.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum houses an exceptional collection of Alaska Native artifacts, many of them gathered by the Rev. Dr. Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian missionary and General Agent for Education for Alaska. The collection is unique in part because of Dr. Jackson's opportunities in the 1880s and 1890s to visit and collect from all parts of Alaska and coastal Siberia.

Displays at the museum, while upgraded to meet modern museum standards, still retain the Victorian-era feel of the original exhibit design. Elaborate ceremonial regalia, utilitarian tools, weapons and clothing are exhibited in cases, while accessible storage drawers hold ivory carvings, games, jewelry and other small items of household and hunting importance.

Jackson stated that his goal in gathering the material and opening the museum was so the "coming generations of Natives" would know how their "fathers" lived. The collection is frequently used by contemporary artists to study the styles and techniques of earlier generations.

During the summer, the Friends of Sheldon Jackson Museum sponsors Alaska Native artists who demonstrate their skills in the museum's gallery. The artists, representing the Aleut, Ugandan, Athabascan, Yup'ik, Inupiat, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures of Alaska, often work in wood, ivory carving, basketry, textiles or beadwork.

Docents interpret exhibits for summer visitors. The Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum operates a gift shop with fine Alaska Native crafts, books and cards. Summer hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily and admission is \$4. Visitors 18 and younger are admitted free.

For more information about either museum, contact Bruce Kato, Alaska State Museum, 395 Whittier St., Juneau, AK 99801-1718, (907) 465-2901, or [bruce.kato@alaska.gov](mailto:bruce.kato@alaska.gov). Visit our web page at: [www.museums.state.ak.us](http://www.museums.state.ak.us).

Photos and slides from both museums are available for media use.

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